Slaughterhouse-Five was written by Kurt Vonnegut, and it has been said that it was encouraged by personal experiences to be put onto paper. Death, as we all know, is an accompaniment of war, and Vonnegut knows this too by treating it as a fact of life. He sums this up neatly with the phrase that becomes repetitive, “so it goes”. Although the novel has the well-known title of Slaughterhouse-Five it has lesser-known titles that formulate different meanings.

Giannone (1977) states the three titles that give this particular novel three very different forms of significance. The first one Slaughterhouse-Five, is of course the pig slaughterhouse in Dresden where the prisoners of war were housed. The second title is The Children’s Crusade, which portrays a feeling of innocence in the face of severe brutality. And finally A Duty-Dance with Death gives the feeling that art and death will confront each other in battle (p.83). It is because of these three titles that we are taken through innocent yet horrific times.

The novel has led us through more than one story to some extent, thanks to Billy Pilgrim’s (the main character) time travelling and this has enabled us to take in more experiences surrounding war and life. The semi-confusing style of Vonnegut that we are exposed to in the reading of his work simply reinforces the confused state that would have been present when the city of Dresden was attacked towards the end of Second World War. The confusion that we first had towards the novel at the beginning is slowly dissolved when we become more involved in the story and learn what can happen in a war.

Slaughterhouse-Five would technically be classified as a fiction novel, it does contain factual information concerning the firebombing of the peaceful German city of Dresden though. It is this inhuman act which killed so many and injured many more, that the novel is based around. The novel could be said to be in part an autobiography, with the only difference being that Vonnegut’s life story is parodied by Billy.

Many critics have agreed with the comment that Slaughterhouse-Five can be in part classified as an autobiography by Vonnegut. Giannone (1977) has stated that the opening and closing chapters are the only chapters in the novel that deal with Vonnegut personally, although we are given hints throughout that he is in some way present (p.84). The idea of Vonnegut being framed in the first and last chapters was also a point that was made by Reed (1977). Reed (1977) goes on to make the comment: “the technique seems entirely appropriate in a novel with a subject matter which is at intensely personal and which is viewed reflectively” (p.1). McGinnis (1994) has suggested that the novel was a form of therapy for Vonnegut, as he was able to get a lot of feelings out in the open instead of keeping them bottled up. He says that it therefore must be in part an autobiography (p.113).

The title The Children’s Crusade came into existence when the wife of one of Vonnegut’s close war comrades commented that war should not be promoted but be instead frowned upon:

“...You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them” (Vonnegut, 1969, p.14).

The only thing that tends to come out of war is heartache and death, so why would one want to have more of such an awful occurrence that does not need to happen in our lives. This sentiment is stated in first chapter of the novel.

While it can be seen then as an anti-war novel, it shows respect for those young soldiers as in the following comment by Vonnegut:

“What war has always been is a puberty ceremony. It’s a very rough one, but you went away a boy and came back a man, maybe with an eye missing or whatever but goddarnit you were a man and people had to call you a man thereafter” (City Limits, 1983).

This comment is so true and we really do owe these brave men so much more than a congratulatory handshake and pat on the back: we owe them our lives.

The topic of war is the main theme and so many comments have been made about this topic. Dunstan (1999) suggests that Vonnegut kept the promise he made not in any way to glorify war and death right to the end of the novel (p.2). She has found that Vonnegut has strong feelings involving technology, as it seems to magnify the cruelty in the world (p.2). We begin to have the same feelings Vonnegut has when it comes to the destruction of Dresden and any war for that matter. It no longer seems important as to which side actually won the war, because so many lives were taken in meaningless battle. Scholes (1979) suggests then that the underlining message that Vonnegut was trying to give was to “be kind and don’t hurt”. And just because we may not be able to stop death, we may be able to stop the slaughter known as war (p.204).

The concept of war is the main and most obvious theme with similarities between Vonnegut’s war experience and Billy’s are also evident. Billy was drafted for military service, but did not really take to being in the war and by no means did he look like he should be there, with his stolen Cinderella shoes. After some time in the war, like so many of his comrades, he was captured and placed in a prisoner of war camp in Dresden. This, too, is true for Vonnegut who was sent to war and worked in a factory to produce vitamins for pregnant women. He survived the firebombing like the character Billy and was rescued by the Russians.

Vonnegut tries to get his point across that war is horrific and pointless, which is the opinion that the majority of us already have. He does not substitute hatred and violence throughout the novel for Vonnegut who was sent to war and worked in a factory to produce vitamins for pregnant women. He survived the firebombing like the character Billy and was rescued by the Russians. Vonnegut tries to get his point across that war is horrific and pointless, which is the opinion that the majority of us already have. He does not substitute hatred and violence throughout the novel for Vonnegut who was sent to war and worked in a factory to produce vitamins for pregnant women. He survived the firebombing like the character Billy and was rescued by the Russians. Vonnegut tries to get his point across that war is horrific and pointless, which is the opinion that the majority of us already have. He does not substitute hatred and violence throughout the novel for Vonnegut who was sent to war and worked in a factory to produce vitamins for pregnant women. He survived the firebombing like the character Billy and was rescued by the Russians.

The novel never stays in the one time zone for long and moves between Billy’s war days to him being an optometrist and then proves or do anything for anyone. He likes being isolated. He does not substitute hatred and violence throughout the novel for Vonnegut who was sent to war and worked in a factory to produce vitamins for pregnant women. He survived the firebombing like the character Billy and was rescued by the Russians.
the same time frames and places that Billy visits, which could have also been visited by Vonnegut. The different time frames have allowed Vonnegut and Billy to be freer throughout the novel. Dawley (1997) says: “Vonnegut will not be tied down by the conventions of time” (p.1). It becomes clear then, that the fragmentation is an advantage in the way the novel flows.

It is quite clear at the completion of the novel that Vonnegut has used a circular approach, whereby you are taken from one time zone to another on regular occasions. What is even clearer is the fact that the novel begins and ends with an autobiographical view of the war story interwoven with the same events and same area. This type of structural technique was perhaps used to the extreme in the novel written by Italo Calvino If On A Winter’s Night A Traveller, a novel that consisted of perhaps two stories. One novel was about two readers, a male and female, who realise that the novel that they had purchased was not what they thought, and so the adventure of finding the real one begins for them. While the other novel is the first few pages or the first chapter even, of ten other novels written by ten different authors that the readers come across along the way. Some may believe that this novel used the circular structure a little too much. If Vonnegut used the circular technique to the same degree as Calvino, the novel may not have had the same impact on its audience as it clearly does have. Although Vonnegut uses fragmentation in his novel, we still get his message that he wants people to know that war is bad and should be stopped. If Calvino’s technique was used in Slaughterhouse-Five the story line would be too fragmented, leaving out totally or just briefly spending time on the important issues that needed to be raised.

The two novels have something else in common – metafiction. This is when a novel actually talks about itself in the very same novel. It is very evident in If On A Winter’s Night A Traveller and it is also present in Slaughterhouse-Five. From Vonnegut (1969) we see a good example:

“As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations, I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper” (p.5).

This example of metafiction adds to the juvenile feel that is present in the first section of the novel. In a sense then it is written about young souls but not necessarily for them. Lewis (1998) uses a good example in his paper on the topic of the circular technique that Vonnegut uses in Slaughterhouse-Five. Lewis says: “the plot begins at the bottom of the circle, jumps back to the top of the circle and continues on in no real chronological flow” (p.3-4). This technique allows for the same scene to be visited more than the one time throughout the novel in order to comprehend the true meaning of the incident. For example, we are introduced to the Tralfamadore planet early on in the novel but are only given a paragraph about it (Vonnegut, 1969, p.25). If Vonnegut did not re-visit the idea of Tralfamadore, we would not understand what it means. We would be left to make up our own ideas on the subject. Fortunately though Vonnegut does allow us to visit the alien planet many more times throughout the novel.

Not many war novels contain hints of the science fiction genre, but Vonnegut does it in a way that makes you believe that without the alien interaction it would just not be complete. Although we feel content and happy with a little scifi, Vonnegut has a differing opinion on the subject where he does not want to be only known for that particular style. He says: “I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled ‘Science Fiction’ ... and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics mistake the drawer for a urinal” (Wampeters, Foma, and Granfallows, 1974).

The genre of science fiction is very much present in the novel and the development of the Tralfamadorean world is in part because Billy and perhaps Vonnegut, can not cope with death and destruction that occurs around them. Like what many of us wish we could have, the alien creatures have special powers unlike us. They have already seen the beginning and end of the universe, as they can see the entire event before them. The Tralfamadorians are the reason why Billy has become unstick in time so that he is able to travel to any period in his life that he wishes to visit (Lewis, 1998, p.1-2). McGinnis (1994) speaks of the fact that the creatures have certain powers that enable them to see “all moments past, present, and future, have all existed and always will exist” (p.115).

Billy learns a lot of life lessons from the alien race, which could help the people back on earth, live in a more harmonious way. Billy and perhaps Vonnegut believe that knowledge should be shared by all and not held over others in a way of controlling them. Billy even went as far as asking the Tralfamadorean creatures ways of getting people to live in peace with each other throughout the world. They answered him with this: “concentrate on the happy moments of life and ignore the unhappy ones” (Giannoni, 1977, p.89). It seems like an easy solution but perhaps the problem is just too great to ever be solved.

For the people who were hit with the firebombs in Dresden, they do not have an opportunity to work through their confusion like we were able to work through Vonnegut’s confusing yet enticing novel. Their real life experience is one that none of us would ever want to find ourselves or anyone close to us trying to work through. But of course war is not that kind, and all of us know someone or know of someone that has been involved in the unforgettable slaughter of human lives, which is known as war. We learn that whatever measures are taken to try and stop wars from occurring, things will never change as long as people show hatred towards one another. We have learnt the hard way that when hatred and war collide, death is the only result. So it goes for now, but maybe in the future it will be “at peace now”.

REFERENCES


